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Work of the Non-Governmental Organizations Section of the Secretariat

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 1997/58, in which the Council requested the Secretary General to submit a report to the General Assembly at its fifty-second session setting out specific proposals to ensure that the workload of the Non-Governmental Organizations Section, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, could be effectively and efficiently accomplished, and recommended that the General Assembly provide the necessary human, financial and technical resources to the Section to enable it to carry out its responsibilities efficiently, effectively and expeditiously. The report also incorporates a description of expanded functions and responsibilities assumed by the Section in the present biennium (1998-1999). The report is submitted to the Council for its consideration.

2. Since the restructuring of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs was not completed until 31 December 1997, the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, at its resumed session in January 1998, decided that the present report should be submitted at its regular session, in 1998.

II. The Role of the Non-Governmental Organizations Section

3. The functions of the Non-Governmental Organizations Section, which are based on Article 71 of the Charter of the United Nations and on Economic and Social Council resolutions 1296 (XLIV) and 1996/31, can be divided into five main components:

(a) Serving as the substantive secretariat of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, which includes the preparation of all required documentation for Committee meetings, providing substantive support to the Committee during its meetings and assisting the Bureau in preparations for Committee meetings. One of the primary responsibilities of the Section is the processing of applications from non-governmental organizations seeking consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Applications are screened to ensure that they meet the technical requirements stipulated in Council resolution 1996/31, prior to their submission to the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations for its consideration. In addition, the Section processes the reports on the activities of non-governmental organizations in consultative status, which must be submitted for Committee review every four years;

(b) Assisting the Committee and the Council in ensuring the full implementation of Council resolution 1996/31 on arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations;

(c) Acting as the focal point within the United Nations Secretariat responsible for providing advice and information on matters related to the non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council, for the benefit of the United Nations Secretariat, the organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, Member States of the United Nations, non-governmental organizations and outside users;

(d) Providing accreditation to representatives of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council. In addition, the Section is called upon to provide advice and assistance to secretariats for world conferences, special sessions of the General Assembly, functional commissions of the Council and other major United Nations events that involve the contribution and participation of non-governmental organizations;

(e) The Section also maintains close contacts and liaison with non-governmental organizations, including through coordination with the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (CONGO), which is principally concerned with the improvement of relations between non-governmental organizations and the United Nations. Non-governmental organizations are provided with information regarding United Nations activities and meetings through main list electronic means.

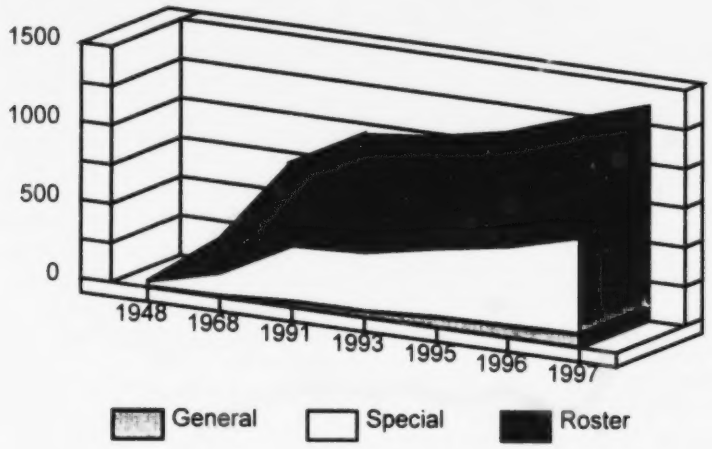
III. Increase in the number of organizations in consultative status with the Council

4. From its inception to the end of 1997, the Council has granted consultative status to some 1,400 non-governmental organizations.

5. The table and figure indicate the substantial increase over the years in the number of non-governmental organizations in consultative status. A particularly dramatic expansion took place in the 1990s. Although all categories of non-governmental organizations have experienced growth, national and advocacy non-governmental organizations have emerged as the fastest-growing groups worldwide. That phenomenon, combined with the impact of

Figure 1.

Number of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council by category



Number of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council

Year	*General*	*Special*	*Roster*	*Total*
1948	7	32	2	41
1968	12	143	222	377
1991	41	354	533	928
1993	42	376	560	978
1995	69	436	563	1 068
1996	81	499	646	1 126
1997	88	602	666	1 356

major developments in the economic and social sphere, has brought those two groups of non-governmental organizations to the United Nations in record numbers.

6. In the 1990s, the United Nations held a series of major international conferences, which helped to mobilize the support of large numbers of advocacy non-governmental organizations around major themes promoted by the United Nations.[1] Subsequently, those non-governmental organizations began to participate in the follow-up to conferences by becoming actively involved in the work of the relevant Council subsidiary bodies, which would eventually necessitate their obtaining consultative status. In the meantime, the Council has adopted a series of ad hoc measures to facilitate their participation in conference follow-up processes, while actively encouraging such non-governmental organizations to apply for consultative status. For example, by its decision 1997/298, the Council invited those non-governmental organizations that were accredited to the Fourth World Conference on Women, the World Summit for Social Development or the International Conference on Population and Development to attend the sessions of the relevant Commissions provided that they had started the process of applying for consultative status. The Commission for Social Development was the first to initiate that practice.

7. At the same time, in its resolution 1996/31, the Council admitted into consultative status exclusively national-level non-governmental organizations for the first time. Under the terms of the previous resolution 1296 (XLIV), national non-governmental organizations had been granted consultative status only if they could demonstrate to the Council that they were international in their scope of activities. Currently, national non-governmental organizations account for the majority of new applicants for consultative status.

IV. Revised procedures to expedite the review of new applications and reclassification requests

8. The Committee, at its 1997 resumed session, adopted new procedures to streamline its work and enable it to review the rapidly increasing number of applications submitted for its consideration. By its decision 1997/3, the Committee reaffirmed that the Secretariat had a principal role to play in ensuring that the formal elements of the applications received were complete, clear and guided by the technical requirements contained in Council resolution 1996/31. It also decided, *inter alia*, that the Secretariat would be responsible for notifying non-governmental organizations with incomplete applications that they would have until the end of September of the year of application to submit the necessary additional information. Furthermore, by 15 December of each year, the Secretariat would circulate copies of the applications deemed to be in compliance with the requirements contained in Council resolution 1996/31. Committee members would then have until 31 March to prepare written comments, reservations and questions on individual applications and relay them to the Secretariat for further clarification. The Secretariat would immediately forward any requests for additional information to the relevant non-governmental organizations for reply. As an additional input to the review process, the Secretariat was also requested to provide Committee members with two lists, the first consisting of all applications on which the Committee had no comments, the second of applications on which delegations had expressed questions or reservations. While those decisions will only be fully applicable in 1999, the Committee requested the Secretariat to initiate the implementation of its guidelines as early as possible.

9. In preparation for the 1998 session of the Committee, the Non-Governmental Organizations Section will have reviewed over 300 requests for consultative status and requests for reclassification. In 1999, it is expected that the Section will review and process some 600 applications and over 300 quadrennial reports submitted by non-governmental organizations already in consultative status with the Council. Those reports, submitted every four years, detail the activities carried out by organizations in support of the work of the United Nations. They are also a means of monitoring non-governmental organizations continuing consultative relationship with the Council, and must therefore be subjected to careful scrutiny, which is an extremely time-consuming task.

V. New initiatives

10. Over the past decade, international development work has come increasingly to involve and incorporate non-governmental organizations. Such organizations range from groups of parliamentarians to grass-roots level farmers, women, indigenous peoples, trade unions and small businesses, all with the potential to effect social, economic and even political change at both the national and international levels. The emergence of non-governmental organizations as a definitive force in the socio-economic arena presents a challenge to the long-standing view of States as the exclusive actors in the international system. As non-governmental organizations increasingly participate in the development work of intergovernmental bodies and address areas of primary concern to them, it is inevitable that growing numbers of them will seek an institutionalized channel through which to influence policies and programmes at the international level. It seems reasonable, therefore, to expect that the number of applications to the Council for consultative status will continue to increase exponentially in the years ahead. It would seem equally reasonable to expect that the nature of the work of the United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations Section will evolve to keep pace with the evolving relationship between the United Nations and its growing cadre of non-governmental constituents.

11. The workload of the Section increased significantly in 1998 and is anticipated to double in 1999. The new procedures introduced for the processing of new applications and reclassifications will result in new and additional responsibilities for the Non-Governmental Organizations Section. As explained in section VII below, it is foreseen that with the additional human resources made available, the Section will be able to improve its operations in this area and meet its deadlines in a timely fashion. It should be borne in mind, however, that the processing of applications and reclassifications is only one aspect (although an important one) of the work of the Section. In its resolution 1996/31, the Economic and Social Council refers to the wider range of activities in which the enhanced involvement of non-governmental organizations is envisaged. It would seem reasonable to anticipate a corresponding diversification in the work of the Section.

12. In order to accommodate the flow of printed documents issued by the Section, as well as the spiralling number of requests for information received from non-governmental organizations, the Section is developing a Web page providing information materials pertaining to the work of non-governmental organizations in the economic and

social sectors and documents related to the work of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations. The Web site will be linked to related United Nations sites of interest to non-governmental organizations.

13. A database, which is now in place, will help to improve coordination of the Section's contacts with non-governmental organizations and facilitate effective participation in the events of particular interest to them. At the same time, the database will enable the Section to improve its monitoring of all non-governmental organization contacts. It will soon be linked with other database systems in the United Nations. The Section will contribute to the creation of an integrated and coordinated non-governmental organization database within the United Nations, as mandated in Council resolution 1996/31. The integrated database will allow the Section to gather, systematize and analyse the information on the activities of non-governmental organizations in consultative status contained, *inter alia*, in their quadrennial reports. The database will also permit the Section to collect information on activities in support of the United Nations carried out by non-governmental organizations on the Roster, who – currently numbering 666 – make up approximately 50 per cent of the total number of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council. They are not required to submit quadrennial reports under the terms of Council resolution 1996/31, many of them having been put on the Roster by virtue of their affiliation with a United Nations specialized agency. Despite that official exemption, however, in recent years a number of specialized agencies have responded to the request in Council resolution 1996/31 to examine the principles and practices relating to their consultations with non-governmental organizations. In the process, the lists of non-governmental organization partners of several specialized agencies have been extensively updated and revised. The integrated non-governmental organization database will allow the Section to coordinate the list of NGOs in consultative status with the Council more closely with the relevant lists of the specialized agencies.

14. The Section will also undertake an ongoing exchange of information with non-governmental organizations focal points system-wide, including resident coordinators at the country level. As a further means of improving the Section's performance through the use of advanced technology, the possibility of making the accreditation application available over the Internet is being explored.

15. With regard to coordination within the United Nations, the Non-Governmental Organization Task Force of the Department for Economic and Social Affairs has provided guidelines for making information more widely available within the Secretariat. Closer collaboration and cooperation is being promoted with CONGO. Policy coordination on NGO matters is ensured through participation in the intra-departmental group on NGOs under the office of the Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations.

VI. Steps to ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the current and projected workload of the Non-Governmental Organizations Section

16. At present, the application process for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations is a complex one. In order to avoid lengthy correspondence and requests for clarifications or complete redrafting, it is proposed that the practice of providing guidelines for completion of the questionnaire be reinstated, and that an updated version of those supportive materials be prepared. The guidelines would provide general instructions and concrete examples of the response to each question, as well as a model of a completed questionnaire. As a further step to rationalize the process, consideration could also be given to the use of experts in the field of testing and measurement to design a model, clear and effective questionnaire to ensure that the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations will receive the most informative inputs on which to base its consideration of applicant organizations. In addition, periodic workshops and seminars on proper completion of the application package could be offered. It is proposed that such instructional sessions take place during special sessions of United Nations bodies and meetings attended by large numbers of non-governmental organizations and, whenever possible, that they take place on conference sites, thereby ensuring a more equal access to organizations outside countries where United Nations headquarters are located.

17. All necessary steps are also being taken to enable the Non-Governmental Organizations Section to provide support to international conferences and special events with respect to the non-governmental organization accreditation process during both the organizational and the follow-up stages, and by maintaining a physical presence at such meetings. Such support will be coordinated closely with the concerned substantive secretariat entity.

VII. Resources

18. Following the review conducted by the Economic and Social Council in 1992 in response to General Assembly decision 46/431 of 17 December 1991 and on the basis of the report of the Secretary-General on the effective functioning of the former Non-Governmental Organizations Unit (E/1992/63), the resources of the Non-Governmental Organizations Section were augmented by one Professional and one General Service staff member from within existing resources. Subsequently, in response to Council resolution 1997/58, the resources of the Section were further strengthened by two Professionals and one General Service staff member, also from within existing resources. The Section is currently headed by a Chief of Section at the P-5 level, with four Professional and four General Service staff members. Thus, the resources of the Section have been increased substantially through internal redeployment, at a time when the Secretariat as a whole is being streamlined. In the light of the growing volume of electronic data (see para. 13 above) that is gathered, processed, systematized and disseminated by the Section, both through the Internet and through the development of an integrated non-governmental organization database, it is intended that one of the existing posts will be used for an information analyst at the P-3 level to manage and coordinate those information flows.

19. Despite the increased number of applications for consultative status with the Council, which is expected to double between 1998 and 1999, even taking into account that the new procedures introduced into the application and reclassification process will further add to the workload of the Section, it is expected that at its current strength, the Section will be able to process those applications in an efficient and timely manner. However, if the Section is to operate equally efficiently in carrying out its other established functions, initiating the projected activities described above and at the same time managing the heavy volume of routine requests for information, there will be a need for some supplementary human resources. In order to ensure its optimal performance, efforts will therefore be made to provide the Section with additional resources, including a Junior Professional Officer, subject to availability of extrabudgetary funding.

20. In view of the new methods of work adopted by the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations at its 1997 resumed session, it is expected that the volume of documentation circulated by the Section to members of the Committee and to the relevant non-governmental organizations prior to the session of the Committee will increase substantially. In addition and in the light of the fact that not all non-governmental organizations currently have access to electronic means of communication, the Section will continue to rely on mass mailings to reach its target audience. Consequently, the necessary steps will be taken to provide the Section with the technical resources in the form of high-volume photocopying, facsimile and computer printing equipment to enable it to accomplish its goals in an efficient manner.

21. Finally, efforts also are being made to improve the physical premises of the Section in order to provide a more user-friendly atmosphere, with facilities that are able to accommodate the large number of non-governmental organizations that now require service.

22. Overall, the Non-Governmental Organizations Section is making a substantial effort to improve its capacity to service the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, as well as maintain its links with the non-governmental community. Within its expanded human resource base, technical capacity and growing experience, it is anticipated that the Section will be able not only to service the Committee but also to play a significant role as a facilitator in networking with non-governmental organizations and in the interface between those organizations and the substantive entities of the Secretariat.

Notes

[1] For example:

Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) (1996)

Fourth World Conference on Women (1995)

World Summit for Social Development (1995)

Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (1994)

International Conference on Population and Development (1994)

World Conference on Human Rights (1994)

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992)